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ABSTRACT

This brief uses 1997 National Survey of America's Families data to examine characteristics of poor, nonresident fathers who do not pay child support. Overall, poor fathers resemble poor mothers in educational levels and barriers to employment. Of the 2.5 million poor, nonresident fathers who do not pay child support, the two largest groups are black and white, with Hispanic fathers accounting for 14 percent of nonpaying fathers. Fathers and mothers differ substantially in terms of living in institutions. Poor fathers receive less means-tested assistance than poor mothers and participate less in job search or education/training activities. In 1996, the average family incomes for both groups averaged only about 50 percent of the federal poverty level. The largest source of income for both groups is personal earnings. Government anti-poverty programs are still targeted primarily toward poor mothers, with poor, nonresident fathers having only limited access. Food stamps are time limited for these fathers, Medicaid does not reach out to them, and they are not eligible for the child-qualifying Earned Income Tax Credit or for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance. (SM)

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Poor Dads Who Don't Pay Child Support: Deadbeats or Disadvantaged?

Elaine Sorensen and Chava Zibman

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Two and a half million nonresident fathers who do not pay child support are poor themselves.

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Nearly 11 million fathers in the United States do not live with their children. Two-thirds of these fathers do not pay formal child support.[1] Society is rightly concerned about the widespread failure of absent fathers to contribute to their children's support. And a variety of recent policy initiatives are strengthening the enforcement tools necessary to ensure that "deadbeat dads" are identified and required to fulfill their child support responsibilities.

But what exactly is a deadbeat dad? Most people would agree that he is someone who shirks his duty *for no good reason.* Our data show that 4.5 million nonresident fathers who do not pay child support have no apparent financial reason to avoid this responsibility. None of these fathers are poor. On the other hand, these data also show that 2.5 million nonresident fathers who do not pay child support are poor themselves.

Obviously, poverty is not an excuse for shirking parental responsibility. Society expects poor mothers to work and use their earnings to support their children. Certainly it expects poor fathers to do no less. But society devotes considerably more resources to helping poor mothers succeed in the labor market than it does to helping poor fathers do so. This emphasis on mothers is appropriate if they face more labor market barriers than do fathers. Its policy merits are more dubious if the fathers are equally ill-prepared to make it in the world of work.

This brief uses the 1997 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) to examine the characteristics of poor nonresident fathers who do not pay child support.[2] We find that these fathers face similar labor market barriers to those faced by the poor mothers, but the fathers have far fewer opportunities to increase their chances of labor market success. We conclude with suggestions about ways to help redress the balance of opportunity.

Although this brief focuses on poor nonresident fathers, it is important to keep in mind the wider context of child support avoidance. Poor fathers are only about one-quarter of all nonresident fathers (figure 1). Even though nonpoor fathers are more likely than poor fathers to pay child support (44 percent versus 10 percent), for every poor father who does not pay child support, there are nearly two nonpoor fathers who do not pay.[3]

Poor Fathers Resemble Poor Mothers in Educational Levels and Barriers to Employment

Of the 2.5 million poor nonresident fathers who do not pay child support, the two largest groups are black (41 percent) and white (40 percent), with Hispanic fathers (14 percent) accounting for most of the rest. The average age of poor nonresident fathers is 34 years, about two years older than the average poor custodial mother

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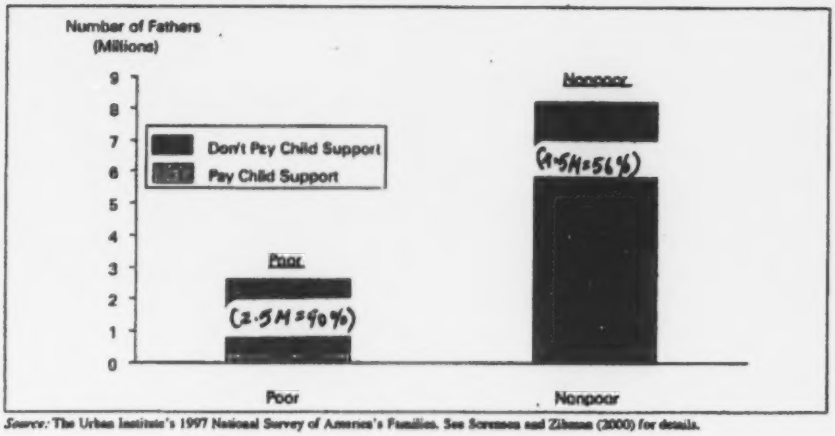
FIGURE 1. Nonresident Fathers, by Poverty and Child Support Status, 1997



Source: The Urban Institute's 1997 National Survey of America's Families. See Sorensen and Zibman (2000) for details.

For every poor father who does not pay child support, there are nearly two nonpoor fathers who do not pay.

who does not receive child support. The educational levels of these fathers are relatively low, as are those of poor mothers not receiving support (table 1). Just over half of mothers and fathers have a high school diploma or equivalent; almost all the rest have less than a high school education.

Fathers and mothers differ substantially, however, when it comes to living in institutions. Twenty-nine percent of poor fathers not paying child support are institutionalized, but none of the custodial mothers are. Furthermore, nearly all institutionalized fathers are in prison. Because being institutionalized severely limits, if not prevents, current labor market work, the rest of our discussion focuses on poor fathers not paying child support who were not institutionalized at the time of the NSAF.

When the institutionalized population is dropped from the comparison (table 2), we find that 43 percent of poor nonpaying fathers (hereafter "the fathers") and 38 percent of poor nonreceiving mothers (hereafter "the mothers") work in the labor market. Among the fathers who worked in 1996, most held a full-time job but worked only part of the year. The mothers worked fewer hours per week but more weeks of the year. The two patterns combine to yield similar annual earnings.

The incidence of potential barriers to work is also similar for the two groups of parents (figure 2). Limited education is the most common barrier, with 43 percent of each group lacking a high school diploma or equivalent. Lack of recent work experience is also common, with about one-third of both groups not having held a job for more than three years. Health barriers are more frequent for the fathers than for the mothers, with 26 percent of the mothers reporting at least one health barrier compared with 39 percent of the fathers. Not having a telephone is the other relatively frequent barrier, reported by about one-quarter of the mothers and one-third of the fathers.

Poor Fathers Receive Less Means-Tested Assistance than Poor Mothers and Participate Less in Job Search or Education/ Training Activities

Given that employment is not common among either the mothers or the fathers, one wonders how they support themselves. The answer is, not very well. In 1996, the family incomes of both groups averaged only about 50 percent of the fed-

TABLE 1. *Education and Institutionalization Status, Poor Nonresident Fathers and Poor Custodial Mothers, 1997*

	Poor Fathers (%)	Poor Mothers (%)
Education		
Less than High School	42	43
High School	56	54
More than High School	2	3
Institutionalized	29	0

Source: The Urban Institute's 1997 National Survey of America's Families. See Sorensen and Zibman (2000) for details.
Note: These are fathers who do not pay and mothers who do not receive formal child support.

TABLE 2. *Employment Characteristics: Poor Noninstitutionalized, Nonresident Fathers and Poor Custodial Mothers*

	Poor Fathers	Poor Mothers
Working (%)	43	38
Average Weeks per Year	29	33
Average Hours per Week	40	33
Average Personal Earnings	$5,627	$5,276

Source: The Urban Institute's 1997 National Survey of America's Families. See Sorensen and Zibman (2000) for details.
Note: These are fathers who do not pay and mothers who do not receive formal child support.

eral poverty level (figure 3)—implying that each group would need to double its incomes to escape poverty.

The largest income source for both mothers and fathers is personal earnings, which represent a somewhat larger portion of family income for fathers than for mothers (44 percent and 38 percent, respectively). Earnings of other family members were also an important source of income for both poor fathers and mothers, representing 26 percent of poor fathers' family income and 17 percent of poor mothers' family income.

Cash assistance—welfare, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), general assistance, and emergency assistance—is considerably more important to mothers, contributing one-third of their family income but only 17 percent of fathers' family income. On the other hand, fathers' families are more likely to depend on social insurance—Social Security, unemployment insurance, workers compensation, and veterans assistance—than mothers' families.

The relative participation of the fathers and the mothers in job search programs and training/education is shown in figure 4. Here we see large differences. In 1996, for example, only 6 percent of the fathers received job search assistance, compared with 11 percent of the mothers. The gap is even more striking for training/education classes, with only 4 percent of the fathers engaging in such activities, compared with 19 percent of the mothers.

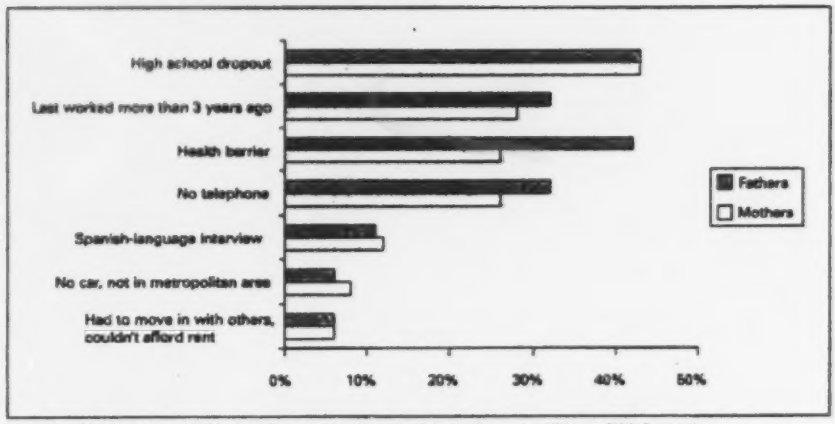
Government Programs Are Still Targeted Primarily toward Poor Mothers

U.S. antipoverty programs have traditionally targeted poor single mothers for services. Until 1996, these mothers were entitled to cash assistance from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) as well as food stamps and Medicaid. Not surprisingly, in 1996, poor custodial mothers not receiving child support were heavily dependent on these programs. More than half of these mothers received AFDC and Medicaid, while 70 percent received food stamps that year.[4]

In contrast, antipoverty programs have

Limited education is the most common employment barrier, with 43 percent of each group (nonpaying fathers and nonreceiving mothers) lacking a high school diploma or equivalent.

FIGURE 2. *Potential Obstacles to Work for Poor Noninstitutionalized, Nonresident Fathers and Poor Custodial Mothers, 1996*



Source: The Urban Institute's 1997 National Survey of America's Families. See Sorensen and Zibman (2000) for details.
Note: These are fathers who do not pay and mothers who do not receive formal child support.

In 1996, only 6 percent of the fathers received job search assistance, compared with 11 percent of the mothers.

not targeted poor nonresident fathers, and their access to these programs has been extremely limited. The only entitlement program available to poor nonresident fathers was the Food Stamp Program, which did not base eligibility on the presence of children in the home. AFDC, on the other hand, was never available to poor nonresident fathers (unless they were living with one of their children). Medicaid was available to poor nonresident fathers, but only if they were medically needy.

In August 1996, Congress passed major reforms to the U.S. welfare system. AFDC, a 60-year-old entitlement program, was replaced with a block-granted program called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Although this new program still provides cash assistance to poor single mothers, it now imposes time limits on benefits and has strong work requirements.

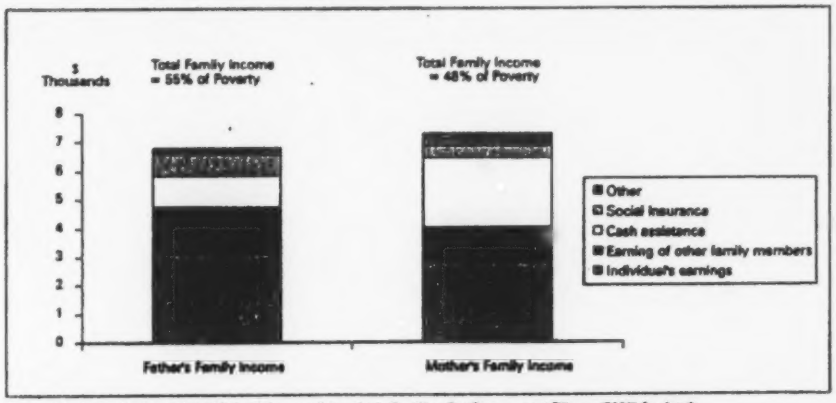
The 1996 welfare reforms also altered poor nonresident fathers' access to antipoverty programs. While nonresident fathers were never eligible for AFDC, Congress gave states considerable flexibility to determine eligibility under TANF. Initially, most states were reluctant to spend TANF funds on nonresident fathers, because it wasn't clear that they could, but in April 1999, the Department of Health and Human Services issued regulations that indicated TANF funds could be used for nonresident fathers.[5] Since then, a few states have begun using TANF funds to provide employment-related services to some nonresident fathers, but these efforts have not been statewide and are relatively minor.[6]

The 1996 reforms did not substantially alter food stamp eligibility for poor custodial mothers, but they did put time limits on food stamp eligibility for "able-bodied childless adults." This provision sets a limit of three months for food stamp receipt over any three-year period for able-bodied adults age 18 to 49 who do not live with their own children and who work less than 20 hours in a week. Although the exact impact of this change has not yet been measured, the time limit is expected to disproportionately reduce food stamp access for nonresident fathers.[7]

Also in 1996, Congress broke the link between TANF and Medicaid eligibility, the latter having historically served AFDC and SSI recipients. Medicaid eligibility changes for poor custodial mothers were minimal, but Congress did allow states greater flexibility in expanding Medicaid. Several states have expanded their Medicaid programs, but we are not aware of any state that has included nonresident fathers.[8]

In 1997, Congress established Welfare to Work (WtW), a $3 billion federal pro-

FIGURE 3. Family Income of Poor Noninstitutionalized, Nonresident Fathers and Poor Custodial Mothers, 1996



Source: The Urban Institute's 1997 National Survey of America's Families. See Sorensen and Zibman (2000) for details
Note: These are fathers who do not pay and mothers who do not receive formal child support. Mothers' families have, on average, one more person than fathers' families—which explains why mothers' family income is higher than that of fathers but is a smaller percentage of their poverty threshold.

gram intended to provide employment-related services to the TANF recipients who are hardest to employ. WtW made a broader array of employment-related services available to TANF recipients. Nonresident parents of children who were long-term TANF recipients were also made eligible for this program—the first time a federal program has explicitly targeted employment-related services to this population.

WtW programs have had difficulty serving nonresident fathers, partly because the original eligibility criteria were too restrictive. WtW programs had expected nonresident fathers to make up 20 percent of their clients, but the most recent data show that such fathers represent only about half that.[9] Congress relaxed these and other eligibility criteria in November 1999, but it is not yet known how this will affect the enrollment of nonresident fathers in WtW programs.[10] It is important to note, however, that WtW is slated to end soon. Congress has already extended the time period for this program but has not added any new funding—making WtW unlikely to be of help to nonresident fathers for very long.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Two and a half million nonresident fathers have family incomes below the poverty line and do not pay child support. These fathers generally face the same employment barriers that poor custodial mothers face. Yet they are significantly less likely to participate in job search programs and other activities to enhance their employability. Few programs are available to provide these fathers with employment-related services, although such services are an integral part of TANF programs that serve poor custodial mothers. If we expect poor nonresident fathers to pay child support, we should consider making employment-related services more available to them.

In addition to employment-enhancing services, the new strategy for moving poor mothers into the workforce increases their standard of living by supporting their wages with other benefits: food stamps, health insurance, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and (in some states) retention of part of their TANF grant when they go to work. Most poor nonresident fathers do not receive these

The gap is even more striking for training/education classes, with only 4 percent of the fathers engaging in such activities, compared with 19 percent of the mothers.

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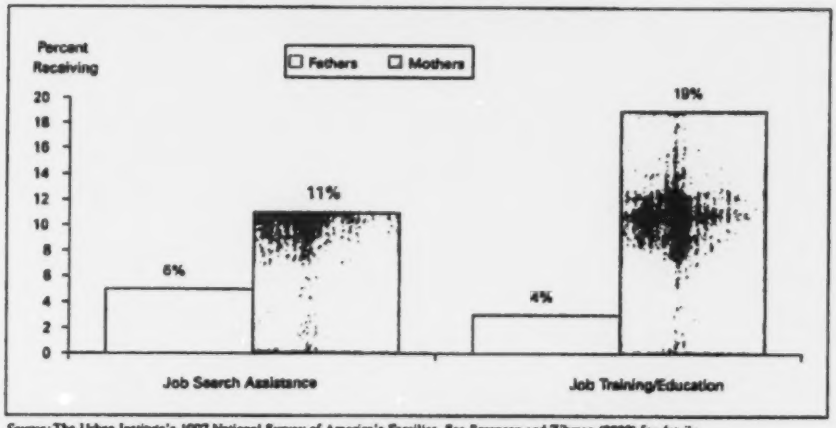
FIGURE 4. *Job Search Assistance and Education/Training, Poor Noninstitutionalized, Nonresident Fathers and Poor Custodial Mothers, 1996*



Source: The Urban Institute's 1997 National Survey of America's Families. See Sorensen and Zibman (2000) for details.
Note: These are fathers who do not pay and mothers who do not receive formal child support. Education consists of General Education Development (GED) or college classes.

If we expect poor nonresident fathers to pay child support, we should consider making employment-related services more available to them.

benefits. Food stamps, as noted, are time limited for this population. Medicaid does not reach most of them. And they are not eligible for the child-qualifying EITC or for TANF cash assistance.[11]

For poor mothers, the message from Congress is twofold. First, poor mothers should go to work to support their children. But second, if they do so, the government will provide certain supports to help make work pay. Poor nonresident fathers do not have similar access to these supports, even if they pay their child support. To rectify the current imbalance—and increase the likelihood that these fathers will contribute to their children's support—we should consider making the income support programs that are available to poor mothers also available to poor fathers who pay child support.

Endnotes

1. When we refer to child support in this brief, we mean formal child support payments, because our interest is in providing information on poor fathers who are outside the formal child support system and exploring whether additional services should be targeted toward them.

2. The first wave of the NSAF collected economic, health, and social information on 44,000 households between February and November 1997. The survey oversamples households with incomes under 200 percent of the federal poverty level and households in each of 13 targeted states. The NSAF provides information on a nationally representative sample of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population under age 65 and their families. A second wave of this survey was fielded in 1999. For more information on the survey and on the survey methods and data reliability, see 1997 National Survey of America's Families Methodology Reports (1999) at http://www.urban.org/newfederalism/nsaf/methodology.

3. For the method used to correct for the widely recognized undercount of self-reported nonpayment by nonresident fathers, see the appendix to Sorensen and Zibman (2000).

4. Medicaid receipt was measured at the time of the survey in 1997, while food stamp and AFDC participation data are from 1996.

5. It is worth noting that after these clarifications, one advocacy organization continued to discourage its members from pressing state representatives for TANF expansions to include nonresident fathers, for fear that such spending might result in fewer TANF resources being available for mothers (Feeley, 2000).

6. For recent information on serving nonresident fathers with TANF dollars, see Reichert (2000).

7. Sorensen and Lerman (1998).

8. In fact, we doubt that any state could extend Medicaid coverage to this population under existing law (Krebs-Carter and Holahan 2000).

9. Perez-Johnson, Hershey, and Belotti (2000).

10. For descriptions of WtW programs that serve noncustodial parents, see Martinson, Trutko, and Strong (2000).

11. In 1995, EITC eligibility was extended to individuals without children, but the maximum credit is quite small.

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Elaine Sorensen is a labor economist and principal research associate at the Urban Institute. Dr. Sorensen is an expert on child support policy and noncustodial fathers. She has published widely on these and related topics and regularly presents her work to program administrators, policymakers, and the public. She is currently working with California's child support program to assess the collectability of their arrears, and is examining the impact of the 1996 child support reforms on low-income children throughout the country. Before joining the Urban Institute, Dr. Sorensen was an assistant professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Chava Zibman is a research assistant at the Urban Institute, where she works primarily on issues relating to noncustodial parents and their children. Her previous work includes an article that she cowrote with Elaine Sorensen on the degree to which eligible children benefit financially from child support.

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This series presents findings from the 1997 and 1999 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered in each round from more than 42,000 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 selected states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. Additional information on the NSAF can be obtained at **http://newfederalism.urban.org**.

The NSAF is part of ***Assessing the New Federalism,*** a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Alan Weil is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

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